



## **Caring for a Poinsettia**

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The poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is a favorite decorative plant at Christmastime and one of the primary trademarks of the holiday season. Joel Poinsett, the first U.S. minister to Mexico, introduced the plant to the United States in the mid-1800's. Though its true flowers are inconspicuous, the brightly colored leaves (or bracts) which surround the flowers at the ends of the stems give the plant its popularity. The true flowers are the small, greenish 'buttons' at the ends of the stems.

The poinsettias sold today are much improved over older cultivars that had the untimely habit of dropping the leaves and flower bracts, often before Christmas. Today's cultivars have larger flower bracts, are available in new colors, and most importantly, have superior keeping qualities. Although red is the overwhelming favorite, you also find, pink, mauve, cream, purple, marble and various combinations of these. These newer varieties were developed to offer more bracts per stem and a wider range of color. They also hold their colorful bracts far longer than the old cultivars – often until Easter. You can also find cultivars with variegated foliage.

**Plant Selection.** When choosing a poinsettia plant, look for one with leaves down to the bottom of the stems. This indicates that the plant has been well cared for and has an active and healthy root system. Pick a plant that has flower bracts and leaves that are fresh looking, not wrinkled, withered, curled, or yellow. Observe the size of the bracts; expect to pay a higher price for quality poinsettias – plants with six or more bracts. The true flowers – the green parts in the center of the bracts -- should be in tight bud. These are called cyathia. Plants with large cyathia having yellow pollen and sap will have the least amount of display life and will not last long indoors. Avoid a plant where the flowers have already dropped and all that is left are the colorful bracts. Be sure to have the plant wrapped before you take it outside to your car. Plants exposed to rapid temperature changes drop their leaves, especially in cold weather.

**Placement and Care in the Home.** Poinsettias need bright light to keep them looking good. An ideal location is in a south or west window but it doesn't have to be in direct sunlight. Placing the plant in a hallway, interior of a room, or other location without much light may seem right from a decorative point of view, but these dark locations should be avoided. Poinsettias stay freshest in a cool room. If the location is too hot, the leaves may suddenly drop. Night temperatures of 60-65°F and day temperatures of 70-75 °F are ideal. Keep the plant away from any drafts, windows, doors, or heating

vents. Water the plant when the top of the soil feels dry to the touch. Add enough water so that the excess drains out the bottom drainage holes. If any water remains in the saucer beneath the pot, drain it off after 15 minutes. Do not let the plant sit in water constantly. Do not water again until the soil feels dry.

**After Christmas Care.** Once the holidays are over, most people discard their poinsettia plant(s). Re-flowering a poinsettia is time-consuming and tricky, but the one most often attempted. If you choose to keep it, here are some suggestions for care. Continue to water and care for the plant until mid-May (about the time your Easter Lily gives up). If the plant is too leggy to make a shapely plant next winter, cut it back. Don't be afraid to cut the stems back to 6 to 8 inches even though there are no leaves. In a few weeks, new growth will appear. This is also the time to repot it. Carefully remove the plant from its container, loosen some of the old soil around the outside soil ball, and repot it into the next larger size pot. Be sure the new pot has drainage holes and use a loose, well-drained potting soil. You can purchase a pre-packaged potting mix or make your own with equal parts of soil, peat moss, and perlite or vermiculite. After repotting, set the plant outdoors in a partially shaded location that is protected from afternoon sun and receives filtered sunlight. Some gardeners prefer to sink the pot in the ground. A protected place in your flowerbed is ideal. Lift the pot every week or so to prevent rooting through, and turn it occasionally so you get even growth. As soon as growth starts, support the plant with wooden or wire stakes to keep the stems straight. Monitor the foliage color; if it appears less than desirable, feed with a soluble houseplant fertilizer. Pinch as needed to shape the plant until about the end of August. Do not pinch after September 1.

Leave the poinsettia outside until the nights become cool in the fall and before the indoor heating season starts. Do not wait until there is danger of frost. By now, you should have a large, well-branched specimen with several growing tips. Move the plant inside to a light, airy location where the temperature is between 60 and 65 °F. A south-facing window is ideal. Keep the plants growing. The plant(s) may drop some leaves as it acclimates to its new home. This is normal and no need for concern. Be careful not to over-water, and reduce the amount of fertilizer to compensate for reduced growth.

In order to induce bloom, the plant needs to be subjected to 13 to 14 hours of total uninterrupted darkness and 10 hours of bright light. This is the tricky part. Finding the right location may not be easy. Some choices are a closet, a spare room in which you never turn on the lights, or the basement. The key is *uninterrupted darkness*. Any light, even for a few seconds from a lamp, will prevent flower formation. An alternative is to place the plant in a black, plastic garbage bag each evening. Regardless of where you put the plant, you should continue to give it bright light and water as needed. By Thanksgiving, you should notice the leaves at the tips of the stems beginning to turn red, and by mid-December the plant should be in full flower. At this point, the plant

can be moved to a cool, bright location and cared for as described for a new plant above.

Even with diligent care, the plant may still not flower. This can be caused by several factors. First, night temperatures should be between 55 and 65 °F. Closets and plastic bags tend to be warm. Excess temperatures can cause leaf drop and may prevent flowering. Second, total uninterrupted darkness is difficult to provide on a regular basis; one 'slip-up' is all it takes. Third, removing the plant from the dark each morning is also easily forgotten. But on the plus side re-blooming a poinsettia can be a challenge that is rewarding when you succeed.

**Are Poinsettias Poisonous?** Surprisingly, this myth is perpetuated every year. Reports of poinsettia toxicity are rumors based on outdated information that is still occasionally being published. All parts of the plant have been tested to prove it is not toxic and the AMA reports that no deaths or serious injury occurred due to the ingestion of the poinsettia plant. Additionally, the poinsettia is not toxic to pets. Reports of convulsions in cats are due to choking on the fibrous plant, not poisoning.